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Crabit or offended? Words in conflicts in Scotland's past

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Conflicts in Scottish texts from the past take us back into a different world. It was a world in which an offence was seen by Scottish nobles as impugning their honour and hence had to be redressed.¹ Furthermore, lack of respect was understood as going against the Christian duty of obedience towards God and God-given authorities and living in peace with one's neighbours.²

I have always been fascinated by how people use language to communicate with each other. In particular, I am intrigued by politeness and impoliteness as essential aspects of human interaction.³ For my PhD I decided to combine these interests with my passion for Scotland and its history.



Colin Campbell, 6th laird of Glenorchy, *Black Book of Taymouth* (Edinburgh: T. Constable, 1855).

My research is about Scottish people's use of language in conflict situations in the 16th/17th centuries. Letters and court-records from that period offer rare insights into conflicts ranging from minor interpersonal tensions to international disputes. My sources include letters from Clan Campbell⁴, correspondence by James VI⁵, and court-records of Scottish post-Reformation kirk sessions⁶ and criminal law courts⁷. Perceptions of im/politeness in conflicts are underpinned by social structures and values which vary across space and time. A key to learning more about Scottish people's understandings of im/politeness – and how these notions changed – is to study their comments on social conduct.⁸

In my sources, Scots was used as a formal written language to express concerns about perceived offences. It was the period of Middle Scots when Scots became a fully functional language and from about 1560 onwards underwent a radical 'language shift towards English' as a result of the Anglicisation process.⁹ Most words used by people to talk about impoliteness at the time are not typically Scots, apart from characteristic Scots spellings and grammar. Instead, they are part of the shared vocabulary of English and Scots, e.g. *offence*, *slander* or *honour*. Moreover, insults often heard in the streets of Scottish towns were *whore* or *thief*, a kind of name-calling also found in London in the same period.¹⁰ Occasionally, however, I come across Scotticisms. The *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* (DOST) – integrated in the online *Dictionary of the Scots Language* – is very useful for identifying their meanings. For example, John Campbell of Skipnish used *crabit* in a letter to his clansman, Colin Campbell, the 6th laird of Glenorchy, to tell him how their chief, Archibald Campbell, the 5th earl of Argyll, had been offended by Colin Campbell's previous letter.¹¹ Examples of other Scotticisms are the use of *boast* in the sense of 'threaten' or the insult *smaik*, meaning 'low, mean or contemptible fellow; a rogue, ruffian'.¹² Both words occur in a case of the St Andrews kirk sessions that records a situation of intimidation against the minister in the parish church of Craill.¹³

The vocabulary of impoliteness used by Scottish people about four hundred years ago was a rich one, whether we look at expressions that were seen as impolite or comments on such insults. Words used in conflicts reveal a concept of deference which reflects a society stratified by a more rigid hierarchy of social ranks. Many words, such as *honour*, have survived until today. However, the specific meanings which these words had to people born into those social structures have ceased to exist. Studying the language of conflicts in historical texts is thus part of rediscovering treasures of Scottish heritage.

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- ¹ Dawson (ed.), *Campbell Letters 1559-1583* (Edinburgh: Scottish History Society, 1997), pp. 12-13.
 - ² Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p.250.
 - ³ See, for example, Culpeper, *Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011).
 - ⁴ Dawson, *The Breadalbane Collection, 1548-1583* (University of Edinburgh, 2004/2007). Available at: <http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/divinity/research/resources/breadalbane> (Accessed: 13 May 2014).
 - ⁵ Letters are selected from print editions and re-transcribed from manuscripts: Akrigg (ed.), *Letters of King James VI & I* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984); Bruce (ed.), *Letters of Queen Elizabeth and King James VI of Scotland* (London: Camden Society, 1849).
 - ⁶ Calderwood (ed.), *The Buik of the Kirk of the Canagait 1564-1567* (Edinburgh: Scottish Record Society, 1961); Fleming (ed.), *Register of the Minister, Elders and Deacons of the Christian Congregation of St. Andrews: Comprising the Proceedings of the Kirk Session and of the Court of the Superintendent of Fife, Fothrik and Strathearn, 1559-1600* (Edinburgh: Scottish History Society, 1889-90); Stuart (ed.), *Selections from the Records of the Kirk Session, Presbytery, and Synod of Aberdeen* (Aberdeen: Spalding Club, 1846); Todd (ed.), *The Perth Kirk Session Books 1577-1590* (Woodbridge: Scottish History Society, 2012).
 - ⁷ Gillon and Smith (eds.), *Selected Justiciary Cases, 1624-1650* (Edinburgh: Stair Society, 1953-74); Pitcairn (ed.), *Criminal Trials in Scotland from MCCCCLXXXVIII to MDCXXIV*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Bannatyne Club, 1833).
 - ⁸ Bax and Kádár, 'The historical understanding of historical (im)politeness', *Journal of Historical Pragmatics*, 12:1-2 (2011), pp. 9, 12.
 - ⁹ Corbett, McClure and Stuart-Smith, 'A brief history of Scots', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scots* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p.9.
 - ¹⁰ Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).
 - ¹¹ MS NRS GD112/39/6/31
 - ¹² DOST
 - ¹³ MS CH2/316/1/1, p.56